

25 How Should We Think about Same-Sex Relationships?¹

It is easy to speak or write on this subject in a way that comes across as offensive and/or as condescending to some people. I am sorry if anything I say has that effect.

1 Resources and Norms

Christian life and theology are traditionally committed to shaping themselves by what they find in scripture, the Christian tradition, and human insight. Scripture means the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, plus the New Testament, with some churches adding the further books in the Greek and other canons as works they read and utilize but do not reckon to treat as inherently authoritative theological resources. Christian tradition means the stream of informally-recognized key figures such as Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and (for Anglicans/Episcopalians like me) Hooker, plus the agreements that many Christian churches came to make that are expressed in the historic creeds, plus convictions expressed in different denominations' confessions (for Anglicans/Episcopalians, the 39 Articles). I then use the term human insight as a catch-all expression covering reason, experience (religious and other), and scientific discovery. (Scripture and tradition are also repositories of human insight, but I will use this last expression simply to denote insight that comes from elsewhere.)

These potential sources of wisdom, truth, and guidance constitute both resources and norms. They include resources that we can utilize freely, by our own discretion, sources of wisdom and obligation whose inherent authority we respond to. They also include norms that we recognize and to which we surrender our discretion. Traditionally, scripture is "the primary norm for Christian faith and life."² It is our supreme resource and norm because of its distinctive and crucial link with the story of God's activity in Israel that came to a climax in Jesus. Christian tradition and human insight are also significant resources, but they cannot trump scripture. Further, the collocation of faith and life in that phrase is significant: questions such as same-sex relationships concern not merely ethics or human rights but theology, and theology needs to shape ethics. How we live is to be based on the way things are and the way God designed them to be. At least, that is the traditional Christian position; in terms of the relationship between theology and ethics, liberation theology has drawn attention to an opposite possibility: praxis makes us ask new questions about theology and maybe come to different answers. But in doing so, it already rests on some implicit theological assumptions.

There are Christians who would put the resources of scripture, tradition, and insight into a more dynamic relationship and reckon there is no fixed differential in status between them. They simply offer us a range of

¹ Not previously published.

² So the "Virginia Report," *The Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 1997), §3.6.

resources and we engage in a continual process of reflection on issues in light of them. I make two negative comments on this. First, if we see ourselves as making our own decisions between these resources, in reality we are not declining to locate normative status anywhere. We are actually making our human insight the norm; we condemn ourselves to believing only things that make sense to us. There is thus a pragmatic reason for resisting this view; it makes us forever the prisoners of our own perspective and culture. Second, there is a more explicitly theological reason for resisting this more open view. The assumption that the three sources stand in undifferentiated relationship is not the historic Christian position, and theologically that is so because the normative nature of the scriptures is tied up with a central feature of Christian faith. Christian faith came into being in essential relationship to certain events in the past. It is not historical in merely the same sense as any set of convictions is historical, in that it came into being in history. It is a set of convictions about the significance of some historical events. It reckons that in Israel and in Jesus God did something decisive to restore the world and take it to its destiny. The normative status of the human insights expressed in scripture issues from the fact that this act of God took place back then. God continues to act now, but anything God is doing now issues from that decisive act of God which is not taking place now. And it is scripture that tells us what God did back then.

What Christian tradition and human insight can do is drive us back to ask fresh questions of scripture and see new insights there. An instance in recent history is the raising of questions concerning the position of women in church ministry. Human *insight* made the church question the dominant Christian *tradition* about women in ministry and made it go back to *scripture* and ask whether scripture really implied that there were forms of ministry that were open only to men. The conclusion of many denominations was that this was not so. They then felt free to let human *insight* have its way concerning this question in the conviction that it opened the church up to implications within *scripture* and it could thus disagree with the dominant Christian *tradition* and with its interpretation of scripture in this connection. Not all denominations agree that this is so; and one way of formulating our dilemma over same-sex relationships is to see it as a discussion over whether the same conclusion here applies. The universal Christian *tradition* and its interpretation of *scripture* sees scripture as viewing same-sex relationships as irregular and morally inappropriate. The question is whether human *insight*, particularly in the Western world, is opening our eyes to other possibilities within scripture.

2 First Testament

I begin with specific scriptural references. First, it is possible that the story of Noah and Ham (Gen 9:20-27) refers to a homosexual act, though if so, it was at least as significantly an act of incest. The story of Sodom (Gen 19) certainly refers to a proposed homosexual act, though it was at least as significantly a proposed act of homosexual rape. It has been suggested that the relationships between Ruth and Naomi and between David and Jonathan were homosexual, though here the converse applies. Whereas those two stories in Genesis may well refer to homosexual acts, they are not the kind of homosexual acts that would be seen by anyone advocating the blessing or

ordination of people in same-sex relationships or the recognition of same-sex marriage as expressive of the kind of relationships they would like to see recognized and blessed. Conversely, whereas the two stories in Ruth and 1 Samuel describe deep and committed same-sex relationships, the stories do not portray them as physically expressed.

In between these four stories come the two verses in the Torah that ban homosexual acts, Lev 18:22 and 20:13. Both describe such an act as a *to'ebah*, conventionally an "abomination." In Leviticus this term is otherwise applied only to forbidden sexual relationships, though Deuteronomy applies it to religious practices such as the making of images, to forbidden foods, and to dishonesty in business. The term does not directly suggest a feeling of disgust but a conviction that these practices are to be absolutely repudiated as incompatible with membership of Yahweh's people; their repudiation is part of its purity as a people. It is difficult to see any other principle that is common to all the practices to which the term *to'ebah* applies. The value judgment it makes on homosexual acts is confirmed and underlined by the declaration that two people who engage in a homosexual act should be executed. Generally in the Torah, such declarations are not declarations of the penalty that a court should impose; at least, it is the rule rather than the exception that Israel does not exact the death penalty from people who are guilty of offences to which this declaration is applied, such as murder, adultery, and idolatry. To say "such a person should be executed" is a way of underscoring the seriousness of the offense, not a way of prescribing the sanction attaching to it.

We do not know when Leviticus was written. Plausible theories locate its origin in priestly circles in Jerusalem before the exile, or in Babylon during the exile, or in Jerusalem after the exile, but we do not have enough information to know which of these theories (or some other) is correct. We do not therefore have the kind of background information that would help us understand the historical significance of the prohibition on homosexual acts. Leviticus itself perhaps implies two rationales for its negative attitude. Both its passages appear in the context of prohibitions concerning certain other sexual relationships, particularly sexual relationships within the family; the book is concerned to avoid imperiling the family, and it implies that homosexual acts do this. The first passage also emphasizes the need for Israel to adopt different practices from the cultures around (same-sex relationships do not seem to have been disapproved in Mesopotamia or Egypt, nor later in Greece and Rome; we lack evidence for Canaan). In the broader context, the teaching in Leviticus shows a concern for living in light of the way God created the world. In a slightly paradoxical sense, this applies to its teaching about animals that may not be eaten; Israelites may eat animals that fit into proper creation categories (the regulation is paradoxical because God of course created the animals that do not fit into creation categories). It applies to not having different species of cattle mate, not sowing fields with two kind of seed, and not putting on cloth made from two kinds of material (Lev 19:19). Humanity should fit into creation. Homosexual acts do not do that.

But there is something odd about trying to discern the First Testament's significance for our understanding of same-sex relationships from these individual passages that are open to varying interpretations. At

least as important is the broader question concerning the significance of sexual relationships and of marriage. A church I drive past on the way to our own church every Sunday has a poster, “Love makes a family; we support marriage equality.” Our culture’s assumption is that the heart and bedrock of marriage is romantic love and our personal choice to get married on the basis of this love, but it is becoming a commonplace to note that this is simply our culture’s (recent) assumption. While the First Testament believes in romantic love (see the Song of Songs) it does not see that as the heart and bedrock of marriage. In Genesis, God instituted the sexual relationship as a means of implementing the divine purpose to subdue the earth and serve the garden. To that end this relationship involves a mutual commitment to forming a new context in which children may be born, nurtured, and taught the faith, and may share in the work of the (extended) family business, in making the farm work; it is also a context in which also the vulnerable and needy may be protected and looked after. The First Testament’s view that heterosexual relationships are the norm forms part of a set of convictions about family and about humanity’s vocation in the world. (Although the First Testament recognizes that in practice family works in patriarchal fashion and recognizes polygamy and divorce, Gen 1 – 2 undermines rather than supports the idea that patriarchy, polygamy, or divorce are “natural.”)

3 New Testament

Both Testaments assume that in general the Torah’s regulations about purity do not apply to Gentiles, and the offer of the gospel to Gentiles does not include the assumption that they must take on these regulations. But most regulations in the Torah are not simply expressive of one principle, such as purity. Thomas Aquinas gave systematic formulation to a distinction between moral, religious, and social regulations,³ and it is a useful categorization, but not one that enables us simply to allocate individual regulations to one of these categories. Regulations for society, for instance, are not morally and religiously neutral; they reflect moral and religious values. Some New Testament documents imply that the First Testament’s regulations about sacrifice not only impose no obligations on Gentiles who come to believe in Jesus but are passing away in significance even for Jews, yet they see them as of continuing theological and behavioral significance as they seek to expound the nature of the Christian gospel and of Christian commitment.

Whereas L. William Countryman argued that the annulment of the rules on purity would extend to rules about same-sex relationships,⁴ the implications of annulling purity rules would have to be considered on a case by case basis in light of the way the religious, the theological, the social, and the ethical come together in different regulations. The fact that the gospel annuls the regulation about textile mixtures (for instance) need not mean it annuls other regulations in which purity concerns are expressed. And the way the New Testament speaks about same-sex relationships in particular confirms that this regulation in the Torah indeed concerns a matter that relates to more than purity. In 1 Cor 6:9-11 Paul declares that among the

³ *Summa theologiae* II/1, questions 99-103.

⁴ See *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

people who will not inherit the kingdom of God are the greedy, which seems to include everybody in the Western world. But along with them are the *malakoi*; while NRSV and TNIV have “male prostitutes,” it has been argued that these are the “passive” partners in same-sex relationships. More certainly the *arsenokoitai*, etymologically the “male-liers,” are people involved in homosexual acts; the word takes up the language of the two passages in Leviticus as it appears in the Septuagint. In other words, Paul did not assume that the Levitical teaching at this point was irrelevant to his Gentile readers. The word recurs in a similar list in 1 Tim 1:10.

I think Countryman is right in seeing same-sex relationships as morally analogous to polygamy and some other sexual relationships that do not involve monogamous lifelong heterosexual marriage (his list is different from mine, but the principle is similar). I do not follow him in seeing them all as morally neutral.

The third passage in the Epistles relating directly to same-sex relationships is Rom 1:24-27, which includes the only scriptural reference to Lesbian acts. Here Paul declares that as a result of their rejection of real worship of God for idolatry, God gave humanity over to further impurity in the form of male and female same-sex acts that are “against nature,” and thus to “shamefulness,” another word that recurs in Lev 18. Richard B. Hays suggests that one significance of Paul’s argument in Romans is that same-sex relationships are not something that causes God’s wrath to fall on the people involved in them but something that reflects the fall of God’s wrath on humanity in general.⁵ It is because humanity is sinful that God surrenders it to the further outworking of that sinfulness, and this is one result. The implication is that people who find same-sex relationships natural are paying the price for the way humanity in general has turned away from God. It would not be surprising, then, that a culture so perverted as that of the West in its greed, militarism, and self-centeredness has had God give it up to forms of sexual expression that do not correspond to “nature.” “You are therefore without excuse, anyone who judges, because when you judge another person, you pass judgment on yourself” (Rom 2:1).

In what sense do same-sex relationships go against nature? The expression could have varying meanings in Paul, from a reference to the way people were created, to the link between sex and procreation, to the attitudes that prevail in a culture. The first two of these are really two aspects of one. Heterosexual relations correspond to the way the human body is made in a way that same-sex relationships do not. Linked to that, the way Gen 1 and 2 describe the creation of humanity and the purpose of that creation suggests that sex was designed for expression within a monogamous lifelong heterosexual relationship in order to fill and subdue the world, and serve the garden. Much of the sexual activity of heterosexual people falls short of that vision and intent for sexual relationships; that might be reckoned to be true in different ways of adultery, polygamy, incest, prostitution, divorce, remarriage, masturbation, living together before/without marriage, and the deliberate lifelong avoidance of conception (I do not suggest that all these are equally problematic morally, and there is

⁵ See *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), pp. 379-406.

room for debate on whether some are problematic at all). It is also true of same-sex relationships.

The question whether same-sex relations go against nature has further resonances in our own culture; for a person drawn to people of the same sex, same-sex relationships are natural. But then, for a heterosexual person, heterosexual relations are natural, but we do not reckon that this means we can simply do what comes naturally irrespective of moral considerations. Neither single people nor married people can do that. In this respect, the same applies to sex as applies to eating. Something can be natural yet wrong. There are few signs that the scientific debate about the “naturalness” of homosexuality is coming to a conclusion, but even if it did so, this would not establish that what was “natural” was right.⁶

4 Living by Creation and Living in Context

Jesus’ aim was to reassert God’s creation vision and make possible a mending of the world that is spoiled by the way humanity has fallen short of God’s vision and intent. The call of the church is then to live by creation. Whereas it has been argued that the ban on same-sex relationships is an aspect of the teaching in the Torah that is abrogated when Jesus comes and/or is binding only on Israel, the argument that the Torah has been abrogated also works in the opposite direction. Whereas the Torah allows for divorce, Jesus takes a more rigorous stance in connection with it, appealing precisely to God’s creation intent. Jesus’ approach to divorce could likewise be applied to slavery. The Torah allows for slavery (or rather for servitude; its servitude is very different from Roman slavery or the slavery imposed on the forebears of African-Americans), as does the New Testament, but that is an allowance made “for your hardness of hearts,” like the divorce regulation. It does not match the way Genesis speaks of humanity’s creation. Christian recognition that slavery is wrong does not provide a model for recognition that same-sex relationships can be accepted; the former involves recognizing the implications of how God made things at the beginning according to Genesis, the latter does not.

Yet the church has not universally taken the view that practices such as polygamy and divorce/remarriage debar someone from membership of the church or (in the latter case) from ordination. The stance of the church has differed among different denominations, among different nations, and among different societies. Fifty years ago, hardly any churches would solemnize marriage after divorce if the first partner was still alive, nor would they ordain a person who had divorced and married again if their first partner was still alive. Many churches now do so. This change was not stimulated by renewed study of scripture but by social change, though in principle the change is in keeping with scripture. The First Testament explicitly and the New Testament implicitly recognizes that human sinfulness within the people of God means it is not realistic for God simply to affirm the ultimate creation standards and then leave a culture on its own when it cannot live up to those standards. So Jesus notes how Deut 24 assumes the occurrence of divorce, even though divorce and a second

⁶ For an illuminating survey, see David de Pomerai and Glynn Harrison, “The Witness of Science,” in Philip Groves (ed.), *The Anglican Communion and Homosexuality* (London: SPCK, 2008), pp. 267-332.

marriage stand in some tension with Gen 1 – 2. And Paul accepts an institution such as slavery (a much more inhuman institution than the temporary debt servitude accepted in the Torah) even though it stands in some tension with that same creation vision.

We cannot take this simply and unequivocally as a model for the way we might approach same-sex relationships, because of differences between scripture's way of handling same-sex relationships over against its way of handling divorce/remarriage, slavery, or polygamy. While scripture may imply that the dysfunctionality of many First Testament marriages is related to their polygamous nature, it accepts polygamy as a practice, as it accepts divorce and second marriage. There is thus a contrast with its explicit criticism of same-sex relationships, along with its declining to make any allowances for them. Yet the Bishops of the Church of England, at least, have explicitly allowed for the acceptance into the church of people in committed same-sex relationships, even while officially not allowing for their ordination.⁷ Archbishop Rowan Williams more recently opposed any "double standard,"⁸ though the New Testament declaration that an *episkopos* or *diakonos* must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2, 12) looks like a precedent for a double standard. It is not clear whether that requirement is designed to exclude polygamy or second marriage after divorce or asceticism. What it does suggest is that it is possible to have stronger expectations of leaders in the church than those applying to ordinary members. (The Church of England for some time had such a double standard over divorce and second marriage; you could be married in church while your first spouse was still alive, and a divorced person could be ordained, but a person who had remarried could not be ordained.)

There is another double standard that does need examining. I have suggested that in falling short of God's intention for sexual relationships, same-sex relationships belong with other practices such as polygamy and divorce/second marriage, though these fall short in varying ways. Yet churches take different stances to each of these. In particular, in the West it has eased its stance on divorce/remarriage and toughened its stance on same-sex relationships. There do not seem to be theological or ethical reasons for this. With regard to each, we are called to a stance and a practice that seeks somehow to hold together a witness to God's creation vision and intent, and a pastoral love for people for whom it is costly to live by the rigor and demands of that vision. We are not very good at doing this in any of these areas. But I do not think we can justify (for instance) a tough stance in connection with same-sex relationships or polygamy and a libertarian one with regard to divorce/remarriage.

The energy in the current debate over same-sex relationships, like that over divorce and second marriage and over the ordination of women, derives from our current social context, at least in the West. There are many aspects to that context. The committed, covenanted same-sex relationships that might give reason for services of blessing and for same-sex marriage in church, and that might not seem a disqualification for the

⁷ See the report of the Church of England House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (London: Church House/Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991).

⁸ See, e.g., J. S. Siker, "The Church of England," in Siker (ed.), *Homosexuality and Religion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), p. 89.

ordination of a person in such a relationship, are not what the scriptures refer to when they speak of particular sexual acts. We are aware that being attracted to members of the same sex is not a matter of choice; in this sense, same-sex relationships are natural, at least for some people. We have great confidence in our own insight and convictions and are inclined to reckon that when we differ from other generations, we must be right. We are a highly sexualized culture. And we believe in free choice.

Our culture also places an emphasis on justice and this consideration is commonly introduced into the church's debate on same-sex relationships, though the way this happens requires further reflection. Does everyone have the right to be considered for ordination? Do the notions of rights and ordination belong together? In what sense is same-sex marriage a justice issue? The freedom of people of different races to marry is a justice issue on the basis of a certain understanding of humanity. Same-sex marriage is a justice issue only if one first presupposes that marriage does not integrally involve two people of the opposite sex. (There might be other justice questions that do affect same-sex relationships, such as employment and participation in the military.)

Our notion of justice, which is commonly taken to imply the conviction that everyone should be treated the same way, is Western rather than scriptural. God does not treat everyone the same way. God gives different nations and individuals different assets, abilities, callings, and so on, and gives more to some than to others. Biblical words commonly translated "justice" and "righteousness" such as *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* refer more to something like the exercise of power and authority in a way that does right by the people to whom one has commitments, and in particular that implements a concern for the needy.⁹ "Justice" and "righteousness" are not about treating everyone the same. But one implication of them would indeed be that in relating to its members who are attracted to the same sex, and to people outside it who are so attracted, the church would be committed to seeking to counterbalance the disadvantageous way they are often treated in society, and committed to relating to them in the pastoral love referred to above. Linked to this is the fact that the notion of "rights" is also Western rather than scriptural. The Bible is more concerned with the responsibility of the powerful towards the powerless than with equal rights for everyone.

One of our current problems is that the question of same-sex relationships has gained significance out of all proportion to its inherent importance. The Jewish Lesbian comedian Lynne Lavner comments on her album *Butch Fatale*, "There are six admonitions in the Bible concerning homosexual activity and... there are three hundred and sixty-two admonitions in the Bible concerning heterosexual activity. I don't mean to imply by this that God doesn't love straight people, only that they seem to require a great deal more supervision." In scripture, immorality in heterosexual relationships is a much bigger issue than same-sex relationships, and among ordinary Christian people and among pastors, irregular heterosexual relationships are much more of a problem than same-sex relationships. We have same-sex relationships out of all proportion. At the beginning of the seminary year on one occasion, I was part of a faculty

⁹ See chapter 16, section 2, above.

panel discussing with new students issues about coming to seminary. Near the end a student asked what is most likely to make a train wreck of one's time at seminary. In my response I included "Getting in a mess over sex." One of the students then asked whether I was referring to same-sex relationships. I did not have that in mind at all, but rather the fact that anecdotal evidence suggests that our seminary students can get into as much of a mess over heterosexual relationships as people in the rest of the culture. But this student assumed that the problem for Christians was same-sex relationships. Not so much. It is problematic heterosexual relations that are the elephant in the room.

Related to that is the fact that in our current discussion at least as much importance attaches to ecclesiology as to ethics. I disagree with the stance that the Episcopal Church takes over same-sex relationships, but that does not make me reckon I must therefore leave the Episcopal Church (for another denomination that I would disagree with over other matters?). I am given more food for thought by Episcopalians who think about seceding on the basis of more central issues such as the fact that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Christians need to discuss further how we can live together when we disagree; and how we can continue to relate together in Christ when some of us decide that we cannot live together.

Also related is the question of our place in our culture. Fifty years ago it was perhaps possible to reckon that there was not too much tension between being a Christian and being a U.S. citizen. There is now much more tension. In addition to our militarism and the gun culture, we are in a terrible mess over consumerism, debt, workaholism, heterosexual relationships, and the family. The assertion of gay rights and the acceptance of same-sex relationships as just as valid as heterosexual ones are part of the way the culture stands in tension with scripture and the church's tradition. Perhaps there was actually much more tension between being a Christian and being a U.S. citizen fifty years ago. Certainly in the third millennium the vocation of the church is to be an alternative community that embodies God's creation vision. That will mean revisiting what it might mean to be family, local community, and nation, and revisiting attitudes to sex, work, and possessions. It will mean treating brothers and sisters who are attracted to people of the same sex with the same love, faithfulness, and commitment as the ones we show to brothers and sisters who are attracted to people of the opposite sex, and persisting in those attitudes to our brothers and sisters when they do find it costly to live with the moral demands that life places on them. It will not mean just accepting same-sex relationships as simply an equally-valid lifestyle choice.